

Preparing for a Potential Disaster
Council President Scott Peters, First District
For the La Jolla Light, February 2008

The threat of catastrophic wildfire is a fact of life in Southern California. Much has been done over the past five years to build on the lessons of the Cedar Fire and improve San Diego's fire prevention and response strategies. Last year's fires, although devastating for those who lost their homes, were a testament to the strength and resolve of our local fire department. No lives were lost in the City of San Diego, and thanks to the strategic and coordinated efforts of our firefighters, many at-risk homes were saved.

More must be done, however, to improve brush management and other fire preparedness programs. Last year, I updated you on the city's attempts to use goats to thin brush in inaccessible areas such as the slopes of Mount Soledad. Over the past year, the City worked to create a pilot program for brush management in the Coastal Zone which would be acceptable to the California Coastal Commission.

Last month, my Council colleagues and I approved that program, which now advances to the Coastal Commission for final review. If it is approved, the City will conduct a five-year trial program under which we will monitor the environmental effects of using goats for brush thinning in the Coastal Zone. Using goats in steep terrain or where access is difficult saves the City money and reduces the risk of injury from air-lifting or otherwise transporting work crews into dangerous areas. I look forward to beginning that work this year.

Later this year, the Council will consider the Mayor's request to fund a second firefighting helicopter. Our current firefighting helicopter, Copter 1, was one of the only air support vehicles flying in the first few days of last year's wildfires, saving countless homes from damage. A second helicopter further expands the City's air support capabilities and ensures that residents have access to continuous fire suppression. The current funding proposal taps into a special Fire/Rescue fund and community donations to pay for the first three years of the lease/purchase agreement. I look forward to hearing more details about the Mayor's long-term funding plan when this item comes before Council for consideration. If approved, Copter 2 could be up and flying by this year's fire danger season.

Another step taken by the Council to improve our fire preparedness is the formation of a new Fire Committee of the City Council. Chaired by Councilmember Brian Maienschein, a battle-tested veteran of catastrophic wildfires, the committee will consider ways to improve brush management and other fire prevention strategies, as well as how to better equip and fund our Fire Department. I am proud to serve as a member of this new committee.

I am encouraged by the steps we have taken to reduce the risk of wildfire and ensure a coordinated and comprehensive response when disaster strikes. I look forward to

working together with my colleagues and all residents of San Diego to make even more progress this year.